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For Gorbachev, the talk stops at arms control

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WASHINGTON - When I was in Moscow recently with a congressional delegation, our party spent a great deal of its time trying, unsuccessfully, to persuade officials that it should see Mikhail Gorbachev.

Ronald Reagan won't have to do that in Geneva: Gorbachev will be sitting across the table from him, a prospect that does not seem to make our president particularly happy.

But I can tell him, from my brief exposure to the party line, what he may be hearing in these next few days, although Gorbachev may have refined the rhetoric a bit.

The setting, of course, will be quite different. We went to Kremlin offices that were, except for the inevitable portrait of Lenin, rather like bourgeois living rooms or even convent parlors.

I am sure that Reagan and Gorbachev will be in a more opulent interior.

The dialogue, however, could be similar, if Reagan makes good on his promise to bring up shortcomings in the Soviet system.

For instance, when Reagan mentions human rights, he will be told that a job is a human right, and that, whereas in the Soviet Union everyone is employed, America's joblessness is at 7 percent. He will also be told about the human right to shelter and be given a taste of Russian outrage about homeless Americans sleeping in the streets.

The matter of Andrei Sakharov, the great exiled scientist, may consume a great deal of time between the leaders. We heard several explanations about his mate. Since Sakharov's wife, Yelena Bonner, is now free to travel abroad for medical treatment, she may end up being the sole sure beneficiary of the summit. Gorbachev may be less defensive about the case than our interlocutors.

A deputy member of the Politburo told us indignantly that Sakharov is lucky to be in exile in Gorki and undeservedly well off.

"He receives his pay from the Soviet Academy of Sciences. We know that Sakharov, through his wife, established relations with American intelligence personnel and American agents. Soviet power has been quite merciful to him. If he were anyone else, he would be tried for treason."

"It is easy," he said, and the president should be at all times prepared for a rapid shift of gears by the other driver, "to be interested in the fate of an individual. We are interested in the fate of millions of people in the world. That is why the American press blows up the question of Sakharov, to complicate the relations between the US and the U.S.S.R."

E.I. Velikhov, the vice president of the Soviet Academy of Sciences and by far the most savvy and least polemical of the officials we met, had a less heated explanation, and one that seemed more plausible at the time.

"It is because he came out in favor of more MX missiles. He advocated a weapon that could be used against us."

But later, in the cramped living room of a refusenik, that was refuted. One of the harassed Soviet Jews said to us: "That is a lie. He was still free after he came out for the MX. It was after he opposed the invasion of Afghanistan."

Maybe Gorbachev will level with Reagan about Sakharov and confirm the obvious: that the Soviets just can't stand dissidents.

He will also hear a number of versions about Jewish emigration. We were told that the Jews are comfortable in Soviet Russia - al-

though that sounded fishy because no one else seems to be - and don't want to leave.

Georgy Arbatov, the Kremlin's top Americanologist, gave us a more unvarnished view: If the Soviet Union lets the Jews go, other minorities would think they were free to migrate, too, he suggested. He left the hint that under those conditions, Russia could be rather promptly depopulated.

The way I see it, the only way they are going to get anywhere is to sit down and start talking about arms control. All other subjects lead to a dead end, as far as we could tell.

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